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ABSTRACT

The composing processes of three students--seventh grade, tenth grade, and college level--are described in this paper. Observations are given for each student, in eight stages of the composing process: prewriting, planning, starting, following a program of style, reformulating, stopping, contemplating, and composing silently. Findings showed that these students do no planning, find starting easy--especially with personal narratives, show preoccupation with technical matters at the expense of content, are syntactically immature writers, omit words and phrases, and do not revise. The author concludes that since students perceive teachers to be editors and proofreaders only and view writing as a joyless chore, teachers need to become coaches and empathetic listeners who provide students with opportunities for pleasurable writing experiences. (JM)

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The Composing Process of Students

Grade 7, Grade 10, and College

New York State English Council Conference

October 17, 1976

CS 203 111

Introduction

As teachers and researchers we have an interest in how students compose -- what they do before, during and after they write a piece.

What do we know about the composing process? A review of the research follows:

Review of the Research

Among other purposes, Sawkins (1970) sought to identify composing procedures of fifth grade students, giving particular attention to good and poor writers to observe sex differences in the quality of written expression, and to observe sex differences in the ability to verbalize the writing process. She asked thirty boys and thirty girls to write two compositions on assigned topics and interviewed them a day after they had written the second composition. She found that most students (1) considered aspects of content before and during writing, some aspects being content of their stories, title or topic, the characters, the setting, and the mood, (2) proceeded to write without notes, outline, or preplanning but made up the story as they went along, (3) did not think about choosing words for particular purposes, using sentences effectively, and paragraphing, (4) asked the teacher for help in spelling, (5) proofread in order to check on mechanics of writing, and (6) rewrote to make the paper neater. In addition she found that more able writers tended to be concerned with content (i.e., ideas, organization within the story, and the function of beginning and ending sentences) while less able students tended to be concerned with the

mechanics of writing (i.e., spelling, punctuation, and capitalization). Regarding sex differences, she found that girls wrote compositions more often judged to be high quality than boys, but boys were better able to respond to inquiries about their writing process.

Emig (1971) delineated the composing process into prewriting, planning, starting, composing aloud, reformulation, stopping and contemplation of the product. She observed and interviewed eight twelfth grade students, finding among other things that they start with ease, do not formally preplan for pieces 500 words or fewer, and do not revise voluntarily for school-sponsored writing.

Like Emig, Stallard's sample (1972) was twelfth graders. However, his sample size and procedures differed. While Emig interviewed each student four times, Stallard observed and interviewed each student during one meeting; while Emig made no distinction between student's ability, Stallard did by grouping students -- one group composed of good writers (the selection of fifteen students who had ranked the highest on the Sequential Test of Educational Progress, Writing Essay Test, Form 2A) and the other composed of fifteen students chosen at random from the remaining students in a Virginia high school senior class. Observing students with the aid of a checklist, interviewing them immediately after writing an expository composition, and examining their writing products, the investigator found that good writers averaged more words, spent more time completing the writing task, stopped and

reread, revised while writing, and were more concerned about having a purpose in their writing than writers in the random group. Both good writers and writers in the random group corrected spelling, were concerned about mechanics of writing, and felt no need to write for a particular audience.

Investigating the writing process of seven year old children, Graves' study (1973) was comprehensive in nature and scope. Over a period of five months, he logged the writing of 94 students into five categories (i.e., title, presence or absence of illustration, assigned or unassigned writing, number of words, teacher comments and notations). Of these children he observed fourteen children as they wrote in class, interviewed seventeen about their concepts of the "good writer", and developed case studies of eight children. He found that students differed in writing behavior and defined two groups of writer - the reactive and the reflective.

The reactive writer was characterized by "erratic problem solving strategies, the use of overt language to accompany prewriting and composing phases, ideation that evolves in action-reaction couplets, proofreading at the word unit level, a need for immediate rehearsal in order to write, rare contemplation or reviewing of products, characterizations that exhibit general behaviors similar to their own, a lack of a sense of audience when writing, and an inability to use reasons beyond the affective domain in evaluating their writing"; the reflective writer was characterized by "little rehearsal before writing, little overt

language to accompany writing, periodic rereadings to adjust small units of writing at the word or phrase level, growing sense of audience connected with their writing, characterizations that exhibit general behaviors similar to their own in the expression of feelings, and the ability to give examples to support their reasons for evaluating writing." (pp.212-213) The reactive writer was most often a boy, while the reflective writer was most often a girl.

Often cited by investigations as a reference, Emig's study became one of the most important guides to examination of the composing process in single cases at grade twelve (Mischel, 1974), grade seven (Hale, 1974; Morgan, 1975), and grade four (Seaman, 1975). Investigators using a single case for study interviewed from six to ten times using Emig's definitions of the composing process to examine behaviors in the student. The investigators found that the students started and stopped with ease and revised infrequently or involuntarily. They also found individual characteristics: Mischel's student did not use a written plan and was inclined to "flower up" (p. 308) or embellish his writing; Hale's student had a propensity towards writing in the reflexive mode and planned as he wrote; Morgan's student proceeded to write without a plan and incorrectly transcribed ideas and words into writing -- saying "it", "anger", "built" but writing instead "I", "angry" and "build" (p. 36) on several occasions; Seamen's student preferred to write about fantasy rather than fact and in planning, he obviously

had a fair idea of what he would write about (p.45).

While Morgan (1975) and Hale (1974) did case studies of seventh graders (as this study does), this investigation also includes students at grade ten and college -- two grade levels in need of investigation. In addition, this investigation observed poor writers from the inner city, all the interviews taking place outside of school in an informal setting. I will describe the composing processes of three students--David (college level), Helen (tenth grade), and Diane (seventh grade).

Dimensions of the Composing Process

Emig defined stages of the composing process (1971, pp. 39-44)

Prewriting — That part of the composing process that extends from the time a writer begins to perceive selectively certain features of his inner and/or outer environment with a view to writing about them -- usually at the instigation of a stimulus- to the time when he first puts words or phrases on paper elucidating that perception. Prewriting occurs but once in a writing process.

Planning — Refers to any oral and written establishment of elements and parameters before or during a discursive formulation. Planning can occur many times.

Starting — Refers to where physically, the writer is when he begins and what habits or rituals he observes. Perhaps the most significant feature of starting that can be readily observed is what element the writer first places on paper, and where in the finished piece that element occurs, if at all.

Reformulation-- Can be of three sorts: Correcting, revising and re-writing. Correcting is a small, and usually trivial, affair that consists of eliminating discrete "mechanical errors" and stylistic infelicities. Revising is a larger task involving the reformulation of larger segments of discourse and in more major and organic ways -- a shift of point of view toward the material in a piece; major reorganizations and restructurings. While others may recommend correcting, the writer himself must accede to the value of the task of revising. Rewriting is the largest of the three, often involving total reformulation of a piece in all its aspects; or the scrapping of a given piece, and the writing of a fresh one.

Stopping— Represents a specifiable moment -- rather, moments -- in the writing process. A writer stops at the ends of drafts or versions of a piece of writing; he stops when he thinks the piece is finished-- when he feels he has worked through or worked out the posibilities, contentive and formal, that interest him in the piece; he also stops for the purpose of presenting a piece in a given state for the reading -- and, usually, evaluation -- of one or more others.

Contemplation of Product-- Refers to the moment in the process when one feels most godlike. The writer looks upon part, or all, of his creation and finds it -- good? uneven? poor? If he has not steadily, or even erratically, kept his reader in mind during the process, the writer may think of him now and wonder about the reception the piece will experience in the world.

Prewriting

David

When asked by me, "Did you think about what you wanted to write?, David answered, "No, but I think I can come up with something." He usually had a clear notion of what direction he wanted to take in a piece of writing, sometimes perceiving the total finished form of the writing product. He explained:

> I know in some way the direction I want to go in...
> You know, it's my mind that's feeding me with things
> to put down on this paper and if my mind says 'no'...
> I have...to...redirect it.

He seemed to think about ideas for poetry frequently because he explained that they came to him "spontaneously" and he wrote them with agility and confidence.

Helen, Diane

As for Helen and Diane, they responded that they "forgot" to think about what they would say in a piece of writing, taking a few minutes before the actual writing to think of something to write.

For personal narrative writing, however, David, Helen and Diane recorded past experiences with no difficulty and found this mode (autobiography, memoir, human incident etc.) "easy" (Mischel, 1974, p.305); the memoir made involved writing down things witnessed, or experienced in the past -- ideas that had undergone perhaps a lengthy incubation

period and thus, were ripe for expression.

Planning

David

David used a word as a pivot for writing poetry. Generating poetry in this manner resembled that described in McElvain's article where the creator searches for "a basis around which to converge his material" or "a point of view from which to start" (p. 132). Planning was unwritten and informal:

> [If I have no structure then]...I'll say a word, okay, and if I say that word long enough, I'll come up with some idea of how to expand around that word and use that word as a pivot...I don't preplan how many lines or many verses [to include]

For writing compositions, planning was somewhat different:

> ...My first procedure is to pick a topic...then subtopics... I don't usually write them down...

Although his procedure differed in the respective modes, planning remained unwritten and informal. When he completed writing the first draft of a piece in my presence, he said, "I think I've said enough so that I could elaborate on it..." and would refer to the draft as he wrote subsequent ones. For David, the first draft functioned as the discovery draft -- the "vision" stage described by Murray (1975, p. 3):

> Vision is the stage of the writing process in which the first draft is completed, what I sometimes call a discovery draft. This stage takes the shortest time for the writer -- in many cases it is written at one sitting -- but it is the fulcrum of the writing process. Before this first draft, which Peter Drucher calls "the zero draft," everything seems possible. By completing this vision of what may be said the writer stakes out a territory to explore. (Murray, 1975, p. 7)

The writing of the first draft enabled him to have a clearer perception of an experience. Writing first drafts helped him place the experience in the proper perspective:

Helen

Like David, Helen did not outline but had a notion of what she would say as she elaborated in the following quote:

> ...Like when I get to the first sentence, it all be in my head what to write...Then wher I get to the [next] sentence I'm going to write [I] think of something and put that next...

Sometimes she could name a few elements that she might include in a piece of writing but she would not know all of them until she was actually involved in the act of writing, a finding that supports the theory that writing is discovery (Pike, 1970, p. 73; Murray, 1975, p. 4). For poetry, ideas "just came to her head" and she wrote them down.

Diane

For Diane, the seventh grader, planning was not written or oral but a matter of writing down ideas "that came to your head".

Thus, planning for this sample was unwritten and informal, findings which support those of previous investigations (Mischel, 1974, p. 305; Emig, 1971, p. 53; Stallard, 1972, p. 43 and p. 63) and theory. Vygotsky explained the nature of planning:

> Planning has an important part in written speech, even when we do not actually write out a draft. Usually we say to ourselves what we are going to write; this is also a draft, though in thought only...This mental draft is inner speech. (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 144)

Starting

David

David started to write with ease for any mode of writing; he usually knew the direction in which he wanted to go and proceeded writing with comments like "okay", "I'm ready", and "How long should it be?" Poetry seemed to present the least problem because ideas came to him "spontaneously" which suggested that these ideas were the result of a longer subconscious prewriting period, surfacing ripe and mature, ready to be expressed. There was, however, evidence that at one time David did have difficulty starting and extending a piece in his college

writing class. The teacher commented on his short paper:

> Clearly you most serious problem is your difficulty in writing under pressure. This is a good beginning, but you haven't been able to develop your ideas.

In addition, David displayed a unique starting behavior. He endeavored to preserve anonymity. If he wrote about a friend or someone he knew he would say "I'm not going to mention any names...", "Can this be fiction?", and "I won't let my friend read this...". During one occasion when he began to write a firsthand biography, a type of writing in which the writer tells what happened to someone he knows well during a certain period or phase of the person's life, he stopped abruptly, and made a discourse related comment about his dislike (and perhaps discomfort) with the topic:

> I don't like it...It's just not good...I don't think I like the topic. I don't care to write this. I'll write about something else, though.

He then began to write about himself, a subject he felt more comfortable about:

> I'm more satisfied with this because I can relate to it better...I feel more at ease...I don't know, I just can't write about a particular person's social activities. I can't write my own. I don't know, I just didn't like what I was writing...

Even when he wrote about himself, he tried to preserve his privacy:

> Maybe that's one of my hang-ups too. Like I don't like expressing exactly how I feel in my papers. In poems, you can sort of hide it but when you're writing compositions, it's like a true statement and much more revealing than a poem. Sometimes I try to like shade out my true feelings. I don't feel it's actually what I want to present because of the fact of someone...really...dig- getting inside my mind.

While the writer realized that not being open and honest in his writing was indeed a "hang-up", he resisted writing about personal feelings and interpersonal relationships, areas that were too intimate to commit to print.

Helen

Helen began with ease in most modes, even poetry. Perhaps the reason why poetry presented no problem was because she liked poetry and used to write it when she was younger. The writing assignment in which she had difficulty starting was an assigned topic ("Mercy Killings") in which she was supposed to give her opinions about the subject and perhaps evidence from other sources. She said, however, "I don't know too much about it..." but managed to produce a short piece.

Diane

For Diane, starting was easy. After asking the investigator preliminary questions like "Can I use pencil?", "Do I have to write a title?", and "How long should it be?", she proceeded to write

"...because you don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. You just write something down...that comes to your head."

Program of Style

As with Emig's subject Lynn, the subjects in this sample also followed a "program of style", a series of stylistic principles that directed their choices among options (Emig, 1971, p. 59). The source of these principles was (1) teachers and (2) self: At times they followed teacher directives or grammar books while at other times, they followed their own concept of "good" writing, frequently explaining the latter as writing that "sounded right."

David

David tried to "be concise" and avoid redundancy:

> I tried to make it more concise and eliminate the excess writing...I read in a book that you shouldn't dribble on in excess verbiage because that can become boring to the reader...

Helen

For Helen, the program was not governed by stylistic principles but by superficial concerns. Her program was governed by (1) writing legibly and neatly and (2) writing to fulfill a length requirement, endeavors which she believed resulted in a better grade:

> ...I'd get about a "B" on this paper because she likes us to fill up the page.

Diane

On the few occasions when Diane wrote a second draft, she simply copied the first draft over to make it neater and more legible or added some details or sentences to make it longer. At one point, Diane actually counted the number of sentences she had written for the teacher's required length of twenty for a composition. In effect, both legibility and length were performed to impress the teacher as this next exchange between her and me showed:

> Inv: Why is the second draft longer?
>
> Stu: Because I could get a good grade on my report card... She'll think I know more.

Diane also placed a title on her paper and sometimes underlined it before beginning to write because she said that her teachers told her to do it.

Reformulation

David

The subjects were given time during the interview and at home to reformulate. David revised drafts of a piece of writing, sometimes as many as four times before he was pleased with it; at these times revisions were internal:

> Internal revision is everything writers do to discover and develop what they have to say, beginning with the reading of a completed first draft. They read to discover where their content, form, language, and voice

> have led him. They use language, structure, and information to find out what they have to say. The audience is one person: the writer. (Murray, 1975, p. 9)

Helen

Helen revised by crossing out words and changing others that did not "sound right". On one occasion she added a section to a poem, but did not alter sentences she had previously written.

Diane

Since Diane did not reread her work, reformulation behavior was ascertained through a request of Diane to "Make the piece of writing in such a way that you are satisfied with it.", a performance that was "other" rather than "self" motivated. On this level the students reformulated by merely copying over the first draft to make it "...kind of long, neat...". For the most part, then, Diane (and to some extent Helen) was concerned with external revision during the first and usually the only draft while David underwent both the internal and external stages of revision:

> External revision is what writers do to communicate what they have found they have written to another audience. Writers now pay attention to the conventions of form and language, mechanics, and style. They eye their audience and may choose to appeal to it. They read as an outsider, and it is significant

> that such terms as polish are used by professionals, which dramatize the fact that the writer at this stage in the process may, appropriately, be concerned with exterior appearance. (Murray, 1975, p. 9)

While Emig defined correcting as the smallest and most trivial affair of reformulating, consisting of eliminating discrete mechanical infelicities, it presented the biggest problem to writers in this sample: They could not identify mechanical and grammatical errors.

Stopping

David

David rarely felt a full sense of closure when he wrote prose. He felt that his writing "...always has room for improvement..." Sometimes he rewrote as many as four times before he was satisfied; sometimes he would "...toy with writing..." or "...rewrite a paragraph over to see how it sounds..." before finally stopping, usually to meet a deadline. But his willingness to tinker and toy with the language in his writing was a behavior characterized by Gibson as one of a creator/pot-maker, sculpting and polishing his creation (1970, pp. 258-259).

On the other hand, David stopped with confidence in poetry writing; he rarely revised his poetry as he stated in the following quote:

> I find poetry much more easier to write than compositions...In poetry I feel I can express myself much more. In composition form...I feel inhibited because of the mechanical skills that are needed...I contemplate on what is right --

> the correct grammatical form all the way down to punctuation...In poetry I'm not so concerned with punctuation as much as what it says...

He explained further that his poetry "...means just what I want it to..." thus complete and exact at the first writing, requiring no further revision. In effect, David's stopping for prose was other-imposed while that for poetry, self-imposed: He stopped in prose to meet a deadline; he stopped in poetry because the product was complete.

Like Emig's subjects, he made comments like "That's it", "Okay", "Finished", "I guess that's it" and "I think it's done" for various modes of writing, comments "...devoid of any emotion but indifference and the mildest of satisfactions that a task is over." (Emig, 1971, p. 87)

Helen

Helen did not always capture everything she had intended to include; thus, her first stop was sometimes tentative and unsure while the subsequent ones moved towards a sense of closure:

> I added the part on the back...because I was reading it over and it didn't hardly explain anything where I had stopped at...I had read it at home and it sounded alright...but I added it when I got here...

Like David, Helen indicated that she was finished with "That's all I can think of", "Okay. This is all. I can't think of nothing more".

Diane

Upon the completion of a work, Diane usually said, "I'm finished".

Contemplation of the Product

David

David usually judged first drafts as poor. Before reading drafts aloud, or giving it to the investigator, he made self-critical, apologetic comments like "...there might be a few misspellings...", "...it could be a little bit better...It sounds silly...", and "...It's awful. Such remarks may have been designed to cushion my shock of listening to him read a "terrible" piece of writing.

The intervention of time between the first and subsequent drafts influenced his contemplation behavior. He would return to a piece of his poetry after a day or weeks had elapsed to see if it still meant to him what it had originally.

Helen, Diane

Neither Helen nor Diane contemplated writing products. For them the first draft was the final draft. They admitted that they rarely read or rethought what they had written before submitting it to the teacher, yet alone judge it. They had conditioned themselves to believe that the quality of a writing product was the purview of knowledgeable people like teachers because as one student explained "the teacher is supposed to tell you if you did it wrong."

With the exception of David who sought feedback from a peer, the subjects said that they asked their mothers to read their products and comment on "how it sounded." The parent remained a significant other in

school and self-sponsored writing, a finding that does not support Emig's that stated "by the time the students enter secondary school, the role of parents in school-sponsored writing is greatly diminshed" (1971, p. 77). In this sample students sought the judgements about the quality of their writing products from teachers and parents.

Composing Silently

The following behaviors were observed of individual students during silent writing:

David

Erasing words and phrases

Pausing

Crossing out words, phrases, and sentences

Rereading words, phrases, and sentences silently or in a low voice; using the pen to point to parts being reread

Inserting words as he reread

Asking questions about writing before and during writing (e.g., "Is there such a word as "embarkments"?)

Sighing

Saying "Oh, that's it! That's it!", a self-congratulatory comment

Referring back to the introductory directions of the writing task

Putting parentheses around a section

Starting over, beginning on a new sheet of paper

Laughing softly as he writes

Inserting words - "it", "was", "his"

Helen

Pausing

Asking questions during writing (e.g., "Are you supposed to write all the way down here [to the bottom of the page]?")

Rereading; using the pen to point to the word or sentence that she reread

Asking how to spell words (e.g., "How do you spell "embarrass'?")

Writing a title before starting

Laughing softly as she wrote and then telling the investigator the incident

Moaning and saying, "This is so hard [to write]!"

Diane

Pausing

Scratching her face

Yawning

Adding "s" to "girl"

Asking how to spell words (e.g., "How do you spell 'swelling'?)

Crossing out words

Adding sentences

Whispering as she wrote

Complaining about how her teacher was "...worrying her about adjectives and pronouns...", a digression

Scribbling and doodling on her paper

Telling me about her dog Pedro when she wrote his name in piece, a digression

Saying, "I keep messing up on the same thing, I had wanted to write "a little'", a critical comment.

Saying, "My arm hurt now," an expression of pain.

Saying, "Let me see" and "Finished", a filler and stopping indicator respectively

Putting her head down on the table

Counting the number of lines in the piece

Referring back to her notes and then writing sentences

Retracing (writing over) a word

Saying, "Now I'm a put 'I spent the night at such and such'", an anticipatory comment

Referring back to the introductory directions of the writing task

Summary of Writing Behavior

During silent writing the subjects paused, reread, looked around the room, asked the investigator questions concerning the writing assignment and spelling and talked softly to themselves as they wrote. The latter behavior seemed to indicate an inability to "think words" without pronouncing them--perhaps an indication that vestiges of vocalized egocentric speech remained and had not completely evolved into silent inner speech (Vgyotsky, 1962, p. 135). This study, however, was not designed to examine this hypothesis.

Findings

What, then, were the findings? What do they mean to us as researchers and teachers? A summary of the main findings follow, along with instructional suggestions:

Finding	Instructional Suggestion
1. No planning; first draft is usually the only draft	Encourage students to write several drafts of papers, help them shape drafts through Elbow's pointing activities (1973, pp. 85-89) and Cooper's responding to student writing (1975, pp. 31-40)

2. Starting was "easy" especially in personal narrative modes	Use Moffett's personal narrative writing tasks (1973) which give students opportunity to write about themselves (autobiography, memoir), others (biography), and groups in which they were members (firsthand chronicle)
3. Preoccupation with spelling, legibility, and neatness at the expense of content	Encourage students to focus primarily on content during the early stages of writing and to concern themselves with exterior aspects in later drafts. Encourage students to use words that they cannot spell but know the meaning of. List misspelled words on the student's paper, the list becoming his personal spelling list
4. Syntactically immature writers	Do sentence combining exercises using the additive (Christensen, 1969) and embedding (Strong, 1973) models
5. Omission of words and phrases in papers; reading in of words that they had meant to write but had not actually written down	Have students read their writing aloud to themselves to classmates, or into a tape recorder attempting to hear omissions
6. No reformulation, or revising of papers	Do revising activities by Macrorie (1970, pp. 25-31 and pp. 189-201) and by Odell and Cohick (1975, pp. 48-53)

Conclusion

Young students perceive of teachers as editors and proofreaders, mundane roles for us to play in the writing process. We need to change that perception, becoming coach and empathetic listeners, responding to their writing in more ways than circling and underlining mechanical and grammatical errors.

Generally, the students viewed writing as a time consuming chore, rushing to complete it, not bothering to reread it, relieved to be finished with the product however well or poorly done. We need to put some joy in writing, providing students with opportunities to write in a variety of modes, making writing a pleasurable experience where the writer derives satisfaction from putting something of himself on the page.

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